The Subjugation of Drake

(Continued from page 7)

"Lock it!" ordered a quiet voice, and he discovered Miss Radford within a few feet of him. She had been hurrying to the door to see if escape lay that way, and the inrush of smoke told her it did not.

He noticed then that the children were already marching, a white-faced girl playing the piano for them. Miss Radford deftly turned the head of the column as it reached the door and started it round the room.

"They'll be putting up ladders," she said in an undertone to Drake. "Get over by the windows."

Drake obeyed, and she darted across the room to check an incipient panic. The next moment she was giving a hasty order to the girl at the piano. She seemed to be everywhere that she was needed the moment she was needed, and yet, while she moved quickly, there was no flurried and panic-breeding haste in her movements. She was outwardly quite calm.

"Sing, children!" she commanded, as the girl at the piano changed the air to a kindergarten marching song; and she started it, moving now to the middle of the room. "Sing, Tommy Cole!" she ordered, as she noted one little fellow whose fright seemed in a fair way to overcome him; and Tommy sang. "Sing, Susy Hopkins! Sing, Mary Brown!" Thus she brought every silent voice into the chorus and diverted attention, so far as possible, from the smoke that was now seeping through the cracks of the floor and from the excited cries outside.

Drake wondered if this cool, confident, courageous woman could be the same whose paralysis of fright had made her so helpless and such a ridiculous spectacle a few days before.

A man appeared suddenly at the middle window and started to climb into the room.

"Stay where you are!" cried Miss Radford, speaking excitedly for the first time. "Line the ladder! Pass the children down!"

A self-opinionated, pedagogical, hysterical coward, as she had previously proved herself, was in command of the situation. It was unbelievable, but true. They all obeyed her instinctively, unquestioningly. She held the children steady, and she told the men what to do.

Drake picked up a child from the marching line and passed it to the man at the window, who in turn passed it to the man below him on the ladder. Miss Radford kept the line moving, but she changed its course so that it countermarched back and forth near the windows. Another ladder was raised, and the first man up did as Drake was doing. Still Miss Radford, by her personality, her confidence and her drill, kept the line moving and the children singing, while she also tried to encourage the girl at the piano.

"Keep playing, Mamie," she said, her voice quiet steady and confident. "It's all right. I'm here, you know."

But the strain was more than child-nature could bear. Mamie faltered, skipped a few notes; the air seemed about to trail off into a jumble of sounds. Miss Radford was at her side, had lifted her from the stool, seated herself and taken up the air with hardly a perceptible break. Even then she had the wit to restrain the girl an instant with one hand, lest she should start a panic by rushing for a window. "Get in the line, Mamie," she ordered, "and sing!"

As the last child was passed out of a window Drake called to Miss Radford to come. But she made no move—did not seem to hear. "Come!" cried Drake. The room was now full of smoke and a corner of it near the door was already blazing, while the fire, darting up from the cracks, momentarily threatened to burst through in various other places. But Miss Radford played on, her eyes fixed on the floor near her feet. Then Drake saw what she saw. A little tongue of flame, starting near a leg of the piano, was creeping along a crack toward the hem of her gown, and she watched it as one fascinated. It was the same little tongue, then not so near, that had made Mamie falter, and it was now within a few inches of the gown that Miss Radford had drawn tight about her feet and was trying to keep from its touch. She played on, but she did not hear; she saw only that tongue of flame and was blind and deaf to all else.

Drake lifted her bodily from the stool and carried her to the window, where she so far recovered herself that she was able to descend the ladder with little assistance.

She was a heroine, of course. People began telling her that before she had fairly reached the ground. They crowded about and praised and questioned and cheered, and some of the mothers even cried. Nor was Drake forgotten, although he sincerely wished he might be. But Miss Radford seemed quite unconscious of the fact that she had done anything unusual and was more interested in assuring herself that none of the children had been hurt than in anything else.

Drake accompanied her to the boarding-house he had just left, and so much of the adulatory crowd as could tear itself away from the burning hall accompanied them. Some one carried his suitcase, which somehow immediately found its way back to the room that he had just vacated. The landlady seemed to have forgotten that he had intended to leave, and he was only too glad to have the room again as a refuge. He did not like being a hero. It might be all right in some circumstances, but the senseless emotionalism of some of the excited people was annoying. Besides, he wanted a chance to think the matter over quietly. It was all so astounding—this wonderful exhibition of cool courage by one who had previously proved herself an hysterical weakling.

She did not appear at supper that evening, the excitement of the afternoon having proved too much for her nerves, so it was not until the following morning that he saw her again. Neither of them then spoke of their exciting experience, except so far as the other boarders compelled them to, but he showed a deferential, almost reverential, admiration that had been lacking previously. He was, indeed, in a state of mental bewilderment, out of which he could make nothing more definite than that he had sadly misjudged her. On her part, she seemed as unconscious as ever of the fact that she had done anything unusual, and spoke in the most matter-of-fact way of the affair when compelled to speak of it at all. Nor was this mere modesty, apparently, but a real failure to understand that there was anything surprising or particularly pratseworthy in her act.

She was deeply interested in the future of her school, however, and Drake went with her to see what arrangements could be made to continue that. It somehow seemed quite natural that he should be her escort and adviser.

Miss Radford shuddered as they stopped a moment in front of the ruins of the town hall. Nothing was now left of it but the foundations and a great mass of charred lumber, in which a gang of men was at work trying to uncover a safe that had been in one of the offices. It was small wonder that she shuddered, Drake reflected, when she remembered how long she had lingered on the second floor of the building of which so little was now left.

"I was thinking," she said, more to herself than to him, "of what might have happened to my children. It—it— Let's go on, please!" She shuddered again and hastily turned away. "I can't bear to look at it."

He glanced at her curiously. *Her* children! That showed her mental attitude. No thought, no memory even, of her own experience in the burning building, but merely a belated shudder for the danger of the children in her charge. And she had collapsed helplessly at the sight of a runaway horse!

"Look here!" he exclaimed abruptly, "why did you do it?"

"Do what?" she asked, puzzled.

"There never was a cooler, braver, more resourceful woman than you proved yourself yesterday," he declared impetuously. "I think you would have burned to death at the piano if I had not dragged you away, and yet—"

"Why not," she interrupted quietly, "if it would save my children?"

Drake made no reply. It was not a matter that admitted of any argument or called for any comment. Here was the most wonderful, the most bewildering woman he had ever met—the weakest and the strongest, the most helpless and the most self-reliant.

But only a little later they discovered that "her children" were to be hers no longer—for a time, at least. The school was to be abandoned. It was merely a summer makeshift of a kindergarten nature, and there was no real need of it. The town would wait now for the regular fall term to begin. The town, of course, was most grateful to Miss Radford and most appreciative of her heroism, but the town, apparently, did not feel called upon to reduce the expression of its appreciation to any material form.

Drake saw Miss Radford's lip quiver when the decision was announced. It meant much to her. She received a mere pittance for her summer work, but that pittance was sadly necessary.

They walked back to the boarding-house in silence, passed it by tacit agreement, and wandered along into the country, each absorbed in thought. Her problem had been serious enough before, and now it was worse. She was naturally thinking of that, and he was also thinking of it—not only of it, but of her. She commanded his admiration and his sympathy. He admired both her physical and her moral courage, and when he recalled her reference to "her" children in explanation of her amazing coolness and nerve he felt that he had surely found the real woman beneath the pedagogical exterior. Her irritating complacence was forgotten. It was of the surface, anyway. Deep down she was a woman—a splendid woman—a troubled woman. He wanted to help her, and there was but one way.

Drake had really lost little of his own complacence, in spite of his experience with other girls. After each refusal he wondered what there was about him that made him ineligible matrimonially, but his confidence returned, in some measure, after brief association with the next girl he met. *She*, he felt deep down in his heart when he reached the point of thinking seriously of the matter at all, would not be so foolish as the others. Perhaps, too, there was an underlying and unexpressed desire to prove this. Then, being an impressionable young man, the combination of admiration and sympathy really affected him deeply in this particular case. So, there being but one way, he tried it.

It cannot be said that his proposal was in line with the ideal of the schoolgirl heart. Indeed, it was rather prosaic and matter-of-fact, with perhaps just a suggestion of condescension. He did not intend it to be so, but it was. He was offering her so much that a woman, especially a woman in her position, should prize. She was worthy of it all, of course, but he felt, although he did not even mentally reduce it to this definite form, that he was bestowing a favor.

She looked up at him in startled surprise.

"Oh, dear, no, Mr. Drake," she replied, "I couldn't think of marrying you."

"Why not?" he demanded, equally startled.

"Think of my children!" she returned. "I feel that I have a real mission in life and that I shall accomplish much in my chosen field. I have ideas that have not been fully tested yet. True, the field is small now, but it will broaden, and the soul and heart that I put into my work will find opportunity for expression that is lacking now." Her eyes glowed with enthusiasm as she spoke of her work, quite as if it were the biggest and most important thing in the world. "Besides," she went on, "I can't disappoint my children, and they will be expecting me back in the fall."

"But in the meantime?" he suggested.

"I've trimmed hats, to tide over, before now," she replied.

He was dazed for a moment, it seemed so incredible. He had offered her so much, and she preferred to teach school and trim hats. Lizzie Potter, too, had preferred Joe Tooker and farm life, and Kate Culver had treated him as a joke. What was the trouble? "Is the whole sex crazy?" he grumbled while packing up a little later, "or am I some sort of social monstrosity? What *is* the matter?" And for several days thereafter he kept repeating to himself in a bewildered way, "I can trim hats! I don't have to marry you: I'd rather trim hats!" It was, perhaps, the most stunning blow he had received. Trim hats! No ordinary diversion would distract his mind from that humiliating thought; he would have to do something desperate.